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ABSTRACT

Early childhood teachers can help young children develop an awareness of and appreciation for the many kinds of family structures in today's society. This Digest provides suggestions for teachers who may have children in their classroom who were adopted. Strategies include: (1) select curriculum activities and materials that represent diverse families; (2) reconsider the name of "adopt-a" projects in the classroom because the phrase devalues the concept of adoption and adoptive parenthood; (3) listen carefully to children's questions--if a child's question deals with the concept of origin, the teacher should not assume that the child is asking about adoption; (4) avoid bias toward adopted children; and (5) consider using bibliotherapy. Careful curriculum planning combined with adoption awareness, genuine concern, and sensitivity will ensure a positive early education experience for adopted children. (Author/LPP)

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Adopted Children in the Early Childhood Classroom

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Adoption in the United States is on the rise—national estimates indicate that 1 million children live with adoptive parents (Stolley, 1993). As the number of adopted children in classrooms continues to rise each year, early childhood programs must begin to educate teachers about adoption issues. Adoption awareness will help teachers support young children who are trying to understand, and adjust to, their adoptive status.

Celebrating individuality, fostering self-esteem, and developing self-confidence in the world beyond the family are socio-emotional goals that receive top priority in high-quality early childhood programs. Multicultural materials are provided in many classrooms, and activities are planned to heighten children's awareness and sensitivity to all families (Derman-Sparks, 1989). Amidst the attention given to recognizing the value and uniqueness of each family represented in an early childhood class, teachers will want to consider the special needs of children who have been adopted. Careful curriculum planning combined with adoption awareness, genuine concern, and sensitivity will insure a positive early education experience for these children. This Digest provides suggestions for teachers who may have children in their classroom who were adopted.

Select Curriculum Activities and Materials That Represent Diverse Families

Teachers can help young children develop an awareness of and appreciation for the many kinds of family structures in today's society. Because adoptive families are becoming more prevalent, it would be appropriate to represent them in class discussions and activities. Specifically in cases of transracial and international adoptions, teachers can strive to provide curriculum materials and experiences that "celebrate diversity, complexity, and the interrelatedness of cultures" (Wardle, 1990, p. 46) by including images of families whose members do not necessarily share similar physical or other characteristics.

The overall emphasis can be placed on the "belongingness" definition of a family, rather than on the circumstances surrounding a particular child's birth. Children might enjoy compiling photographs to make books about their individual families, or they may be interested in cutting pictures from magazines to make a family collage or bulletin board. Either activity could be used as an introduction or summary for thematic experiences planned to help children understand the many kinds of families and ways families are formed.

Teachers can be sensitive to adopted children's feelings in the selection and planning of family-themed activities. "Family related assignments stimulate thought about who we are and where we come from, bring our feelings about our families to the surface, help us to look at our families from a different perspective, and make our families more visible to others" (Edwards & Sodhi, 1992, p. 13). For children who have been adopted, this reflection may result in confusion, raise questions that cannot be answered, and underline differences between these children and their peers. For example, a teacher's request for newborn photographs needed as part of a bulletin board display would be inappropriate, and perhaps disheartening, for a child who was adopted at the age of 2 years.

Reconsider "Adopt-a" Projects

The phrase "adopt-a" is frequently used to preface the name given to specific projects within classrooms, schools, or communities. It is difficult for adoptive parents to explain adoption to their child when his class is involved in an adopt-a-whale or an adopt-a-road program. The obvious reason for the phrase being problematic is the manner in which it devalues the concept of adoption and adoptive parenthood; in the above examples, adoption is considered a temporary commitment dependent upon annual monetary renewal or trash removal. "Adopt-a" programs may result in "adopt-a-confusion" (Johnson, n.d.). Because young children are not abstract thinkers, they may struggle with the task of sorting out the differences between adoption of people and adoption of animals or other objects. Teachers do not need to eliminate these types of commercial projects or sponsorships, but they might want to consider a more appropriate name.

Listen Carefully to Children's Questions

Children's questions can help teachers gain an accurate understanding of what the child wants to know. If a child's question deals with the concept of origin, the teacher should not assume that the child is asking about adoption; the child who asks "Where did I come from?" may simply be looking for an answer to give his friend who has said "I was born in Chicago." In such cases, an appropriate response to the child's question might be "What do you mean?" This response gives the child an opportunity to clarify his question and identify exactly what information is needed as an answer. Similarly, a question such as "Do I have two mommies?" could be given a reflective response such as "Is that what you think?—you have two

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mommies?" This type of response opens the door for dialogue that may give the teacher insight into the child's evolving understanding of adoption.

Preschoolers and kindergarteners who were adopted as infants or toddlers rarely display any adoption-related adjustment problems; they have little understanding of reproduction and, therefore, cannot really understand what adoption means (Smith, 1993). Through sensitive discussions and simple, honest explanations, however, teachers can help children understand that (a) every baby grows inside a woman's body, and (b) after a baby is born, he may live with the woman who gave birth to him, or he may live with other parents (Melina, 1989a). Emphasis should be placed on helping children develop an understanding of adoption as a way families are formed and an inclusive concept of "family" that refers to people who care about each other independent of their biological parentage.

Avoid Bias toward Adopted Children

Some adoptive parents are reluctant to share information about their child's origin with classroom teachers; they are concerned that teachers may not understand the confidential nature of the information and may treat their child differently from other children in the classroom who have not been adopted. They may further believe that teachers may start looking for problems because the child is part of a nontraditional family (Melina, 1989b). Teachers, like many other people, may react to societal stigmas and stereotypes of adoptedness that paint a less than accurate portrait of an adopted child.

Generally, teachers make a conscious effort to treat all children equally. Specifically, they should maintain consistent academic and behavioral expectations that are independent of a child's adoptive status. Teachers may especially want to examine the degree of leniency used in situations involving an adopted child, because research suggests that teachers are more lenient with a preschool child who has been adopted (Kessler, 1987).

Consider Using Bibliotherapy

Although a number of books for young children deal with the topic of traditional adoption, not all of these stories portray the same process. Teachers need to carefully select adoption books that not only relate a contemporary story but also parallel a particular child's adoption history. For example, *The Chosen Baby* (Wasson, 1977) describes a couple who easily adopts a baby boy, and later a baby girl, through the services of an adoption agency. Although this delightful story is classic in its charming explanation of the adoption process, it does not describe the means by which many, if not most, adoptive families are formed today. However, it may be difficult, if not impossible, to find books that do fit a particular child's adoptive situation; a published book about a single woman adopting an infant through a notice in the newspaper would be a rare find indeed. In this and similar less common situations, making a book or a scrapbook might be suggested as a way for parents to relate their child's adoption story. In fact, the best storybook to use in talking to a child about adoption is one made by the adoptive parents themselves—a loving, sensitive, factual description of their child and their adoption experience just the way it really happened (Melina, 1989b).

Conclusion

The familial landscape of our nation is ever changing. No longer can early educators assume that all children in the same classroom share a common traditional family structure. "The reality is that children living in 'non-traditional' families now represent the majority in the classroom. Their undeniable presence challenges our traditional definition of 'family' and demands that we create a more sensitive and inclusive environment that supports children regardless of their family configuration" (Edwards & Sodhi, 1992, p. i).

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For More Information

Adoptive Families of America (AFA): (800) 372-3300; http://www.AdoptiveFam.org/

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